

The ‘Goethean’ Discourses on *Weltliteratur* and the Origins of Comparative Literature: The Cases of Hugo Meltzl and Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett

Goethe konnte noch seine ‘*Weltliteratur*’ sich vorzugsweise (oder gar ausschliesslich?) als (deutsche) *Übersetzungslitteratur* denken, welche ihm Selbstzweck war. Uns kann dies Alles heutzutage nur ein Mittel sein zu höherem Zwecke. Wahre *Vergleichung* ist nur dann möglich, wenn wir die zu vergleichenden Objecte in möglichst unverfälschtem Zustande vor uns haben [...] Mit kosmopolitistenden Nebeltheorien haben die Ideale vergleichender Litteratur gar nichts gemein.

Hugo von Meltzl, ‘Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur’ (1877)

From the olden time of the Saxon clans down to these modern days of Canadian and Australian federations, the British nation has passed through almost every social stage with which Comparative Literature has to deal; and, while the making of our empire’s literature is going on before our eyes, our best writers are every day expressing more deeply that cosmopolitan and world-wide spirit which is the servant of no one special group but the sympathetic friend of all. It was this cosmopolitan spirit that I studied in *Comparative Literature* under the name of ‘world-literature,’ and I illustrated its various characteristics by Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Indian and Chinese examples. But my amateur critics fell foul of my nomenclature. They were apparently unaware that my ugly term ‘world-literature’ had received its literary baptism from Goethe long before it was used by me, and that the great poet of Germany had long ago expressed his confidence that in the making of world-literature, his countrymen would play, as they have played, no ignoble part.

Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, ‘The Science of Comparative Literature’, (1901)

These two quotations – one appearing in *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (*ACLU*), the world’s first academic journal devoted to comparative literature in that journal’s inaugural year, the other in a retrospective article written by the author of the first English-language monograph to be entitled *Comparative Literature* (1886) – demonstrate the extent to which ‘Goethean’ discourses on *Weltliteratur* marked the origins of the Western academic discipline of comparative literature. These discourses – decidedly in the plural because of the multiple and often contradictory conclusions which can be drawn from Goethe’s statements on *Weltliteratur* – need to be described as ‘Goethean’ because they now belong not so much to an individual author, but rather to a figure who has become, in the words of Marcel Reich-Ranicki, a ‘brand-name’ (*Markenzeichen*) signifying at once the notion of classical German culture and a would-be universal idea of progressive human development or *Bildung* (17).

The notion that Goethe’s ideas about *Weltliteratur* are central to the genesis of comparative literature is by now a commonplace of the scholarship dating back to the late nineteenth century. Before turning to an in-depth analysis of two of the most important of those nineteenth-century sources in Hugo Meltzl and Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, it is useful, in these extended introductory remarks, to examine how Goethe’s ideas about *Weltliteratur* are still influencing debates in comparative literature today. Our opening survey of Goethe’s discourses on *Weltliteratur* will reveal the diversity and complexity both of Goethe’s various positions and of their receptions. The ‘Goethe’ that we will find on this variegated critical

terrain is no longer simply an individual author but more like a series of critical possibilities that can be activated within different cultural and political contexts.

Meltzl and Posnett are two of the chief ‘activators’ of Goethe’s positions on *Weltliteratur* towards the end of the nineteenth century, the period in which comparative literature was forming itself as an academic discipline. In an article published in 2006 (‘Rebirth of a Discipline’), David Damrosch directly compares these two seminal figures in the history of comparative literature, and both are anthologised in sourcebooks on comparative and world literature.¹ But Damrosch’s article does not analyse these two figures through their respective receptions of Goethe’s discourses on *Weltliteratur*. Such an analysis will show not only how Goethe’s ideas could be invoked to underpin widely divergent positions concerning the aims and methods comparative literature, but will also reveal precisely what is at stake, both historically and today, in Meltzl’s and Posnett’s respective conceptions of comparative and world literature.

In the recent scholarship on Goethe’s ideas about *Weltliteratur* and their implications for comparative literature, three issues are of importance: first, the relation of *Weltliteratur* to transport and communications technology, to capitalism, and to what might be called the ‘traffic of intellectual trade’ (*geistiger Handelsverkehr*) that is made possible by these innovations; second, the Eurocentrism and classical humanism of Goethe’s remarks on *Weltliteratur*; and finally, the role played by translation in the creation of *Weltliteratur* and the concomitant philological and political critiques of the reliance on translations into major European languages.

Goethe’s discussions of *Weltliteratur* as a mode of cross-cultural trade arguably receive more attention today than the other features of his discourses on world literature, precisely because they resonate with theories of literary globalisation. Here one of the most prominent contemporary scholars is Damrosch, who defines world literature as simply encompassing ‘all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation, or in their original language’ (*What is World Literature?* 4). Since this phenomenon is everywhere to be found in the global book market both historically and today, the analysis of cross-cultural literary circulation, whether facilitated by translation or not, must be viewed as a central feature of comparative literature, though Damrosch stops short of arguing that world literature is *constitutive* of comparative literature. In emphasising the quantitative aspect of distribution and circulation over qualitative considerations of aesthetic value, Damrosch’s definition resonates with a note of ambivalence in Goethe’s own discussions of *Weltliteratur*. In his remarks from 1829-1830 on the German translation of Thomas Carlyle’s biography of Schiller, which he greeted as a positive example of intercultural exchange, Goethe nonetheless observes:

Wenn nun aber eine solche Weltliteratur, wie bei der sich immer vermehrenden Schnelligkeit des Verkehrs unausbleiblich ist, sich nächstens bildet, so dürfen wir nur nicht mehr und nichts anders von ihr erwarten als was sie leisten kann und leistet [...] was der Menge zusagt wird sich grenzenlos ausbreiten und wie wir jetzt sehen in allen Zonen und Gegenden empfehlen. (Goethe, *Sämtliche*, part 1, vol. 22, 870).²

In its allusion to what might today be called ‘market forces’, Goethe’s discussion of *Weltliteratur* anticipates the ‘cosmopolitan’ aspects of capitalism as described by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*, where they observe that in the context of the *Weltmarkt*,

¹ See Damrosch, Melas and Buthelezi; Schulz and Rhein; and D’haen, Domínguez and Rosendahl.

² Hereafter cited as FA (*Frankfurter Ausgabe*), followed by part, volume and page numbers.

national literatures are increasingly displaced by an ‘allseitiger Verkehr’ that leads to the formation of ‘eine Weltliteratur’ (466). Marx’s and Engels’s choice of the noun *Verkehr* (intercourse, traffic, exchange) reminds us that in Goethe’s usage, this term has multiple functions: it can be merely neutral or descriptive; it can be negative, in the above-used sense of something inevitable or unavoidable (*unausbleiblich*); and it can be positive, in the form of ‘geistiger Handelsverkehr’ between nations (FA 1, 22, 870).

Geistiger Handelsverkehr describes for Goethe a normative project of European intellectual exchange. An example of this from Goethe’s own biography is his and Herder’s appropriation of Shakespeare during the 1770s as a guiding model for their then nascent German national literature. On the German side, needs were identified that could be fulfilled through the reception of a dramatist who showed Herder and Goethe how to be a north-European national poet outside of the strictures of French Neo-Classicism. In *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), Hans-Georg Gadamer has demonstrated the multiple temporalities inherent in such examples of world literature. The world in which a work was created can, he argues, be entirely different from the world which decides to admit that work to the canon of its world literature, an admission that occurs via prestigious translations. For Gadamer, the ‘normative sense’ (*normativer Sinn*) inherent in the concept of world literature lies in the fact that such works speak to diverse audiences across various epochs (167), thereby corresponding with Gadamer’s definition of the classical, which combines the normative with the trans-historical (290-95).

Here, with Gadamer, we arrive at the notion of *Weltliteratur* as a form of European classical humanism. In his *Routledge Concise History of World Literature* (2011), Theo D’haen places Goethe’s ideas about world literature within the tradition-line of classical humanism to which Gadamer also belongs (27-30). According to this model, works of world literature give expression to humanistic values that are universal and therefore able to resonate across gulfs of cultural difference. Even if time, distance and translation may dim the original vibrancy of the text, in most cases – it is argued – something universal that speaks to human interests will survive the process of intercultural *Verkehr* or exchange. The implications of this humanistic version of *Weltliteratur* for comparative literature are to be found in the literary models (*Muster*) that Goethe regards as having universal validity when undertaking cross-cultural comparisons. When Goethe informs Eckermann on 31 January 1827 that he is reading a Chinese novel in French translation,³ Eckermann replies that such a text must seem very ‘alien’ (*fremdartig*). Goethe responds by saying that the people in this novel think, act and feel in the same way as Europeans. Expanding on this theme, Goethe observes that precisely because literature is the ‘common possession of all humanity’ (*Gemeingut der Menschheit*),

National-Literatur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Welt-Literatur ist an der Zeit [...] Aber auch bei solcher Schätzung des Ausländischen dürfen wir nicht bei etwas Besonderem haften bleiben und dieses für musterhaft ansehen wollen. Wir müssen nicht denken, das Chinesische wäre es, oder das Serbische [...] sondern im Bedürfnis von etwas Musterhaftem müssen wir immer zu den alten Griechen zurückgehen, in deren Werken stets der schöne Mensch dargestellt ist. (FA 2, 12, 225)

While Goethe does seem to admit this Chinese novel into his canon of world literature, in that it touches upon purportedly universal modes of feeling, when it comes to questions of universal judgement he still invokes the forms of classical Greece. As we shall shortly see, Goethe also

³ The novel in question is *Iu-Kiao-Li ou le deux cousines*, trans. M. Abel Rémusat (Paris: Moutardier, 1826); the English translation, by Peter Perring Thoms, is entitled *Chinese Courtship* (London: Parbury, Allen and Kingsbury, 1824).

deploys classical Greek models in this way in the context of the theoretical work undertaken for the *West-östlicher Divan* (1819).

Closely related to the classicism of Goethe's discourses on *Weltliteratur* is the allegation that the *Welt* in Goethe's *Weltliteratur* refers only to Europe. Goethe uses the formulation 'Europäische, d.h. Weltliteratur' as the heading for an unpublished schema relating to the third *Heft* of the sixth volume of the journal *Über Kunst und Alterthum*, published in 1832. This *Heft* is indeed an exclusively European affair,⁴ and Goethe's schema is concerned chiefly with matters of intra-European literary influence, particularly the question as to whether German, French, British and Italian literature are open to foreign influences and to what extent they influence one another. While, for example, the contemporary Germans are described as working only 'für sich [...] ohne Bezug aufs Ausland', the French 'sind von jeher gewohnt nach außen zu wirken' (*Werke, Weimarer Ausgabe*, part 1, vol. 42.2, 500).⁵ The normative conception of *Weltliteratur* contained in the volumes of *Über Kunst und Alterthum* is an Enlightenment one, which states that mutual literary reception can lead to human progress. In the first *Heft* of volume six (published in 1827), Goethe observes: 'Überall hört und liest man von dem Vorschreiten des Menschengeschlechts, von den weiteren Aussichten der Welt- und Menschenverhältnisse' – a development which he associates with the formation of 'eine allgemeine Weltliteratur' (FA 1, 22, 353). But despite the Eurocentric heading of Goethe's schema for *Heft* three of volume six, there is no sense in which the conception *Weltliteratur* found across all *Hefte* of the journal remains confined to Europe, even if European sources do predominate. One need only look at the contents of the first two *Hefte* of volume six to find non-European content, which includes German translations and discussions of Persian and Chinese poetry. In his classic study *Goethe und die Weltliteratur* (1946), Fritz Strich addresses the allegation of Eurocentrism by claiming that Goethe saw intra-European literary exchange as being only the first and preparatory stage of a truly world literature. Nonetheless, in Strich's treatment, European literature is still the seed from which the plant grows: 'Weltliteratur ist ein werdender und wachsender Organismus, der sich aus dem Keim der europäischen Literatur entwickeln kann' (27).

One of the central issues in recent discussions of Goethe's discourses on *Weltliteratur* is the nexus between Eurocentrism and a blithe optimism concerning the efficacy of translation of non-European texts into European languages. If Emily Apter is correct in describing Goethe's *Weltliteratur* as a version of 'situated universalism' – a position which entails extrapolating purportedly universal categories from one's own culture and projecting them onto objects from another cultural sphere in order to evaluate, assimilate and consume them (7) – then the only possibility of a politically normative *Weltliteratur* would involve a critical reflection on the linguistic, cultural and political situations out of which that *Weltliteratur* is conceived. And when, more recently, Aamir Mufti turns to Goethe's ideas about *Weltliteratur*

⁴ The third *Heft* of volume six of *Über Kunst und Alterthum* contains work on the Italian painter Andrea Appiani and his depictions of Napoleon's campaign in northern Italy, on a bust of Goethe created by the French sculptor Pierre-Jean David, and on poems written to Goethe from Italy by his friends Friedrich von Müller and Friedrich Christoph Förster. Also of interest in relation to the history of comparative literature is an essay appearing in this *Heft* by Friedrich Wilhelm von Riemer entitled 'Einiges zur Geschichte des Übersetzens', the focus of which is almost exclusively European (Greek, Latin and modern European languages).

⁵ Hereafter cited as WA (*Weimarer Ausgabe*) followed by part, volume and page numbers. Hendrik Birus has provided a rich context for this material by arguing that Goethe's work on literary influence is bound up with his polemics against what he regarded as the narrow patriotism of German romanticism (Birus, 'Goethe's Idee'). The second volume of *Über Kunst und Alterthum*, published in 1817, includes, for example, Goethe's and Heinrich Meyer's anti-romantic and anti-nationalist essay on 'Neu-deutsche religios-patriotische Kunst'.

in *Forget English!* (Mufti 1), it is no coincidence that his entry point is Goethe's conversation with Eckermann concerning one's need to return to the Greeks as aesthetic models when faced with non-European texts such as a Chinese novel.

For both Apter and Mufti, it is Erich Auerbach's essay 'Philologie der Weltliteratur' (1952, published in a *Festschrift* for Fritz Strich), which first announces the possibility of this self-critical or 'negative' form of philology. 'Negative philology' – to use Apter's moniker for Edward Said's adaptation of Auerbach's philology of *Weltliteratur* (219) – involves the recognition that *Weltliteratur* is at once *utopian* in its suggestion that a library of the world could be compiled and translated, thereby leading to complete cross-cultural communication and understanding; and *dystopian*, in the sense that such a process would entail the homogenisation of a global literary culture, thereby eliding the particularity of national traditions. As Auerbach himself puts it (in the Saids' translation of this seminal essay), the standardization of world literature to 'a single literary culture, only a few literary languages, and perhaps even a single literary language' would amount to the simultaneous realisation and destruction of *Weltliteratur* (Auerbach 3). Although Mufti concedes that Auerbach's argument deploys 'the rhetorical structure of exaggeration' (15), for Mufti, whose chief focus is South Asia, global English might eventually turn out to be just that single language of homogenisation. The reason for this is clear: the need to translate and assimilate non-European cultures was an essential component of the British colonial project in the Subcontinent, and as Goethe recognised, it is also a key feature of globalised Anglophone capitalism, which means that, in Mufti's words, '*a genealogy of world literature leads to Orientalism*' (19, emphasis in the original).

For this reason, it is important that Edward Said, in the Preface to the second (2003) edition of *Orientalism*, singled out the German tradition of scholarship in general, and Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* in particular – as positive examples of a non-colonialist and humanist philology belonging to *comparative* and not world literature. This humanist tradition – which Said associates with 'Herder and [Friedrich August] Wolf, later to be followed by Goethe, [Wilhelm von] Humboldt, Dilthey, Nietzsche, Gadamer, and finally the great Twentieth Century Romance philologists Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer and Ernst Robert Curtius' – is for him 'exemplified [...] most admirably in Goethe's interest in Islam generally [...] a consuming passion which led to the composition of the *West-östlicher Divan*' (xviii). Most recent Anglophone discussions of Goethe's discourses on *Weltliteratur* do not offer any detailed analysis of the *Divan*,⁶ perhaps because it predates Goethe's first pronouncements on *Weltliteratur* by some eight years, and because its theoretical apparatus, the lengthy and at times arcane *Noten und Abhandlungen zu besserem Verständniß des west-östlichen Divans*, has never been translated into English. But the *Noten* to the *Divan* are extremely important for the present discussion because they tackle two of the most salient issues in the on-going debates about *Weltliteratur*, issues which are also addressed by Meltzl and Posnett. First, and as Peter Szondi has observed (75), the *Noten* attempt to offer a universal theory of poetic genre (*Gattungspoetik*), which is derived from Goethe's work on morphology, thereby representing what is perhaps the only instance in which Goethe attempts to develop a comparative method for literary studies; and second, they offer extended reflections on the limitations of translation.

Goethe's work on comparative anatomy was bound up with his reception of Kant's critical philosophy, especially the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), which Goethe began to read

⁶ An exception is the American Germanist John Pizer, who has (albeit briefly), pointed to the importance of Goethe's remarks on translation in the *Noten* to the *Divan*. Pizer's intervention (see 'Origins and Relevance of *Weltliteratur*') is discussed below in footnote 11. For a more comprehensive discussion in German, see Birus 'Goethes Idee'. For further context on the *Noten*, including their academic reception and their relevance to recent debates in comparative literature, see Nicholls.

in the year of its publication (see Richards 427-30). Goethe's version of the comparative method involves developing ideal morphological types that can act as heuristic guides to comparison. A naïve version of this theoretical notion of type can be found in Goethe's ideas about the *Urpflanze*, which he developed in the late 1780s, and which Schiller would later describe to Goethe as corresponding not with an experience, but rather with something resembling Kant's notion of an idea of pure reason – an abstraction used by the human mind as a means of ordering experience.⁷ Goethe returns to these problems in the mid 1790s, arguing that when it comes to the comparison of animal species, comparative anatomy requires one to develop a universal idea or archetype of animal development that is abstracted from empirical observations of particular organisms. 'Die Idee', writes Goethe, 'muß über den Ganzen walten und auf eine genetische Weise das allgemeine Bild abziehen. Ist ein solcher Typus auch nur zum Versuch aufgestellt, so können wir die bisher gebräuchlichen Vergleichungsarten zur Prüfung desselben sehr wohl benutzen' (FA I, 24, 230). For Goethe, these genetic archetypes are merely heuristic constructs or Kantian regulative ideas that need to be tested against experience, demanding critical self-awareness of the gap between human ideas about the world and the world 'in itself'.

In the *Noten* to the *Divan*, Goethe adapts this genetic method for the purposes of cross-cultural literary comparison, observing that such a procedure will be just as difficult as the attempts made by the natural sciences (*Naturkunde*) to understand the relation between external characteristics of minerals and plants and their internal laws of development (Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen*, vol. 11, sub-volume 1.2, 194-95).⁸ These disclaimers notwithstanding, Goethe elaborates three purportedly universal species or genres (both words coincide with the German *Gattung*) of literature. 'Es giebt', he writes, 'nur drey ächte Naturformen der Poesie: die klar erzählende, die enthusiastisch aufgeregte und die persönlich handelnde: *Epos*, *Lyrik* und *Drama*' (MA 11, 1.2, 194-95). These *Naturformen* represent a perfect example of what Apter has termed 'situated universalism' (7), since – as Szondi has noted (76-77) – they emerged from Goethe's correspondence with Schiller concerning Aristotle's ideas about genre in the *Poetics*.⁹ Goethe's projection of classical Greek literary categories onto the non-European sources of the *Divan* demonstrates that when it comes to questions of comparison, one's cultural horizon may exert an unconscious influence upon how materials are selected and evaluated, and in this respect Goethe's *Naturformen der Poesie* anticipate his Eurocentric conception of *Weltliteratur*. What is of lasting significance here, especially for the Anglophone reception of Goethe to which Posnett belongs, is the purportedly *organic* and *genetic* method of cultural comparison which influenced the 'comparative method' as it developed in nineteenth-century British thought.

As Pheng Cheah has recently noted (Cheah 2016), it is precisely the contradictory energies found in Goethe's discourses on world literature which may harbour a normative potential for contemporary criticism. While conceding that Goethe's conception of world literature is undeniably Eurocentric (43), Cheah proposes – in a manner heavily redolent both of Auerbach, and, as we shall shortly see, of Meltzl – that Goethe's non-geographical conception of 'world' as a normative and future-directed space of intellectual encounter may allow for processes of cultural exchange that would not elide cultural particularity (38-42). And

⁷ See Goethe's letter to Herder on the *Urpflanze* dated 17 May 1787 (FA 1, 15.1, 346); see also Goethe's account of his conversation with Schiller on the *Urpflanze* (FA 1, 24, 434-38).

⁸ Hereafter cited as MA (*Müncher Ausgabe*) followed by volume and page numbers.

⁹ While on 28 April 1797 Goethe complains to Schiller that Aristotle's method of proceeding in the *Poetics* is too materialistic, thereby capturing only the accidental and not the essential properties of literary works, Schiller responds on 5 May by stating that although it may appear that Aristotle's concept of *Gattung* is concerned only with empirical elements, his actual emphasis is on the essence (*Wesen*) of the work (MA 8, 1, 341-43).

despite the Eurocentrism of the *Noten* to the *Divan* (a text not considered by Cheah's book), there are moments in this text that might anticipate something resembling Said's Auerbach-inspired 'negative philology': a philology that would be alive to the way in which the philologist's own contingent situation may lead him or her to repress the otherness of the objects under investigation. When, for example, William Jones compares the poetry of Yemen with that of the ancient Greeks in his 'Essay on the Poetry of the Eastern Nations' (1772), finding in both examples a rustic celebration of nature (see Jones, 320-24), Goethe criticises Jones for this comparison, observing: 'Jedermann erleichtert sich durch Vergleichung das Urteil, aber man erschwert sich's auch: denn wenn ein Gleichnis, zu weit durchgeführt, hinkt, so wird ein vergleichendes Urteil immer unpassender, je genauer man es betrachtet' (MA 11, 1.2, 188-89). For Goethe, Jones's attempt to introduce the poetry of Yemen to British readers by comparing it with Greek models is both 'unnecessary' (*unnötig*) and even 'damaging' (*schädlich*), because the comparison both domesticates and misrepresents the Yemeni sources. He thus observes that we should honour this poetry by understanding it within its own cultural context, thereby suggesting that a truly normative intercultural dialogue requires the suspension of one's own prejudices (MA 11, 1.2, 188-89).

But when it comes to questions of Goethe's linguistic competence, Said is simply wrong in his assertion that one would require 'an excellent command of several languages in order to support the kind of understanding that Goethe advocated for this understanding of Islamic literature' (xix). As is well known, Goethe possessed no advanced command of Persian or Arabic, and his main source for the *Divan* was provided by Josef von Hammer's renderings of Hafiz entitled *Diwan des Mohammed Schamsed-din Hafis* (Tübingen, 1812-13), as well as by the translated materials contained in Hammer's journal *Fundgruben des Orients*.¹⁰ As Andrea Polaschegg has shown in her analysis of the *Divan* and its *Noten*, Goethe rhetorically manoeuvred himself around this problem by claiming to understand his sources directly and sensuously rather than via the mediation of linguistic understanding or translation (320-25). In a letter to Christian Heinrich Schlosser dated 23 January 1815, Goethe points to the limitations of 'book' or encyclopaedic knowledge, valorising instead his attempts to *feel* his way into the sources by practising Arabic calligraphy, since 'in keiner Sprache ist vielleicht Geist, Wort und Schrift so uranfänglich zusammengekörpert' (WA 4, 25, 164-65). This recourse to intuition instead of conceptual knowledge emerges from Goethe's requirement, outlined in the *Noten* to the *Divan*, 'daß man jeden Dichter in seiner Sprache und im eigenthümlichen Bezirk seiner Zeit und Sitten aufsuchen, kennen und schätzen müsse' (FA 1, 3, 270). While, to paraphrase Goethe in the *Noten*, translations may be praiseworthy for their ability to draw us into a text (*anzulocken*) and to introduce us to it (*einzuleiten*), a real understanding of a foreign text requires us to have an encounter with the original language. If Goethe could not do this conceptually, he nonetheless attempted to feel the rhythms of his sources by learning their calligraphy, which is presumably what he meant by 'orientalising oneself' (*sich orientalisieren*, FA 1, 3, 200).¹¹ It is for this reason that Said, in his 2003 Preface to *Orientalism*, emphasises the process of *Einfühlung* (feeling one's way into a text) as central to Goethe's philological method, because it displays an ethical sense of empathising with one's sources (xix). As we shall see, the idea that comparative literature must demand *direct* or unmediated access to literary sources, which can then be supplemented by *indirect* understanding gained through the

¹⁰ On Goethe's sources for the *Divan*, see Hendrik Birus's commentary (FA 1, 33.1, 725-30).

¹¹ On this question, see also John Pizer ('Origins and Relevance' 9), who argues that 'Goethe's most cogent notes on the practice of translation occur in the notes to the *West-östlicher Divan*.' According to Pizer, Goethe 'regards a translation in which the target language is virtually surrendered to the nuances, rhythm, and even structure of the source language as the most advanced approach to this activity'.

mediation of translation, is also central to Hugo Meltzl's conception of the discipline as outlined in his journal *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum (ACLU)*.

Hugo Meltzl (1846-1908), also known as Hugo Meltzl de Lomnitz, was born in the Transylvanian town of Szászrégen to an affluent family originating from the region of Spiš in north-eastern Slovakia. Situated in present-day Romania, Szászrégen belonged to Austria-Hungary during Meltzl's lifetime and featured a mixed population of German, Hungarian, Romanian and Romani speakers. Meltzl's mother-tongue was Siebenbürgisch-Sächsisch, as a child he learned standard German, Hungarian, Romanian and Romani, and he is also said to have commanded a knowledge of English, Italian and French during his adult life. *Polyglottismus* – perhaps the central feature of Meltzl's vision of comparative literature – was therefore a fact of his biography. Following his education at the German *Gymnasium* in Bistrița, Meltzl – like many of the German-speaking elite of his region – pursued his university education in Germany, studying philology, theology and philosophy in Heidelberg and Leipzig. At Leipzig, Meltzl came to know Nietzsche, who inspired in him a life-long interest in the writings of Schopenhauer. Earlier on, while studying at Heidelberg between 1864 and 1866, Meltzl was influenced by the Indo-Germanist Adolf Holzmänn (1810-1870), who is said to have alerted Meltzl to the importance of Goethe's ideas concerning *Weltliteratur*. There Meltzl also befriended Loránd Eötvös, a physicist who was the son of József Eötvös, the Minister of Culture who appointed Meltzl to the Chair of German Language and Literature at the University of Kolozsvár in 1872, which was founded in the same year as Meltzl's appointment (Tóth-Nagy 50; Lehnert 17-18).

The complex political situation of the University of Kolozsvár (present-day Cluj-Napoca, Romania, also known as Klausenburg in German), must be taken into consideration when analysing Meltzl's ideas about comparative literature as they appear in *ACLU* (for context, see Voia). Although Meltzl in some ways represented the German-language culture of Siebenbürgen (the German name for Transylvania), the official language of the university was Hungarian, and many inhabitants of the city were native speakers Romanian. This explains Meltzl's multiple roles under the auspices of *ACLU*: as both a representative and a critic of the German discourse on *Weltliteratur*; as a promoter of the Hungarian national poet Sándor Petőfi as well as of Hungarian literature in general, especially of folk-poetry; and as a publisher who sought to bring the languages and literatures of the world together in one publication. Here it is useful to display the title page of volume six (numbers 91 and 92, dated 15 and 30 June 1881) as an indicative example. On this page one can read the journal's motto – a quote from a letter written by Schiller to Christian Gottfried Körner on 13 October 1789 – which appears in Latin translation, the original of which reads as follows: 'Es ist ein armseliges, kleines Ideal, für eine Nation zu schreiben; einem philosophischen Geiste ist diese Grenze durchaus unerträglich. Dieser kann bei einem Fragment (und was ist die wichtigste Nation anders?) nicht stille stehn' (Schiller, vol. 6, 847).

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Miservm est et vile problema, vnivs tantvm nationis scriptorem doctvm esse; philosophico quidem ingenio hic qvasi terminvs nvllo pacto erit acceptvs. Tale enim ingenivm in tractando fragmento (et quid aliud qvam fragmentvm est natio quaeque qvamvis singlarissima?) acquiescere non potest.

SCHILLER. (Epistola ad KÖRNERVM.)

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For Meltzl, working in the multilingual context of Kolozsvár, the word ‘nation’ in Schiller’s quote probably also meant ‘language community’, since his public role was to demonstrate objectivity regarding the rights and interests of the Hungarian and German speaking populations of his region (Romanian was not represented by his journal, probably because it was an oppressed culture in the Kolozsvár region). The need for apparent objectivity concerning the politics of language may explain why the original Hungarian title of the journal, which headed all issues up until the end of 1878, was replaced with the dominant Latin title. At the bottom of the page one can also read that *ACLU* describes itself as a polyglot, bimonthly journal for the ‘higher art of translation’ (*höhere übersetzungskunst*), and for ‘so-called world literature’ (*sogenannte weltliteratur*). The editors also declare that for the purposes of the journal, all languages of the world have equal rights (*alle sprachen der welt [...sind...] gleichberechtigt*), and that contributions ‘in more remote idioms’ (*in entlegenen idiomen*) will be supplied with interlinear translations. Meltzl also periodically rejected the use of capital letters for German substantives because he thought this might alienate foreign readers (see Lehnert 24).

ACLU initially appeared twice monthly between the years of 1877-1882. Each year was divided into two volumes (volume 1: January to March; volume 2: June to December, missing out the summer months of July and August). There was a progressive decline in the number of issues per year up until 1888, when it folded. The reason for this decline may well have been monetary as well as academic: Meltzl and his colleague – the polymath Sámuel Brassai (1800-1897), whose work in the fields of philology and mathematics saw him play a leading role at the new Kolozsvár University – are said to have financed the journal from their private resources (Lehnert 17). The journal had a tiny and elite circulation amongst its network of scholars and contributors (Fassel, ‘Zum Geleit’ 8) – see, for example, the list of collaborators on the title page above – but even they may not have understood all contributions to the journal, since under the banner of *Polyglottismus* it claimed to publish in no fewer than ten official languages (in fact eleven, when one adds the Latin title to Hungarian, German, French, English, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, Dutch and Icelandic).

The most widely-known piece from *ACLU* is the ‘Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Literatur’, outlined in three parts across three separate issues.¹² However, the third part of this serialized essay does not appear in the English translations published in existing English-language anthologies of key texts in the history of comparative and world literature.¹³ This is regrettable, since the third part of the ‘Vorläufige Aufgaben’ speaks directly to linguistic issues that are central to today’s debates concerning world literature. Here Meltzl announces that the journal’s official policy of *Polyglottismus* must, for practical reasons of ‘economy and limitation’ (*Ökonomie und Beschränkung*), be replaced by ‘Dekaglottismus’ (*ACLU* 3, no. 24, (1878): 498). This move is justified by the claim that there are ten modern literatures which are truly of world-literary rank (494). The criteria for this selection are not explicitly stated, other than by mentioning the names of famous authors or works (for Italian: Dante and Leopardi; for Spanish: Cervantes; for Iceland: the Edda, to name three examples). Russian is excluded, based on the dubious claim that it is more a political than a literary language (496). As part of his justification for his choice of ten languages, Meltzl distinguishes between ‘Kunstliteratur’ – presumably, literary works that are consciously formulated as works of art by individual authors and which have a world-literary profile – and ‘Volksliteratur’: works that originally circulated as oral literature and are seen to have ethnological rather than strictly artistic value (494).

¹² See *ACLU* 1, no. 9 (15 May, 1877): 179-82; *ACLU* 2, no. 15 (15 October 1877), 307-15; *ACLU* 3, no. 24 (28 February 1878), 494-501. Hereafter cited in text as *ACLU*, followed by volume, issue and page numbers.

¹³ See Schulz and Rhein; Damrosch, Melas and Butelezi; D’haen, Domínguez and Rosendahl.

But Meltzl then expresses grave doubts about this ‘*reineuropäischer u. moderner Dekaglottismus*’ since it would neglect the whole field of Asian literature (498, emphasis in the original). In fact, he freely admits that *Dekaglottismus* cannot possibly meet the demands of a truly universal comparative literature, which must lie somewhere in the future, once Asian languages can be transcribed into the European alphabet (499). This gesturing towards the future accords with Meltzl’s claim, outlined in part one of the ‘Vorläufige Aufgaben’ – published in *ACLU* 1, no. 9, (1877): 179-82 – that *vergleichende Literatur* is a ‘science of the future’ (*Zukunftswissenschaft*, 179). When one peruses the articles published in *ACLU* in 1877, German is by far the best represented language, followed by Hungarian, English, French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch and Swedish. As Gertrud Lehnert has observed, despite its radically polyglot claims, *ACLU* was predominantly a Hungarian-German journal that made occasional forays into other languages and literatures (22-23). In 1877, these included a German translation of a ‘dramatisches Gedicht’ from Japan, some ‘Literary Notes from London’ appearing in English, an essay on *Don Quixote* in Spanish, and a ‘Norwegisches Lied’ translated into German. A regular feature in all issues is a section entitled ‘Symmikta’, in which Hungarian poetry appears in the original language and in translations (for example into English and German). It is for this reason that Meltzl describes *ACLU* as ‘zugleich ein Organ für Übersetzungskunst und Goethe’sche Weltliteratur’ (*ACLU* 1, no. 9 (1877): 179).

Central to the journal is the principle of *Vergleichung*, which Meltzl defines in opposition to the practices of ‘literary history’ (*Literaturgeschichtsschreibung*), of philology, and of *Weltliteratur* (*ACLU* 1, no. 9 (1877): 180). All three, he argues, have fallen prey to nationalism. A case in point for Meltzl is the literary historian Georg Gottfried Gervinus (1805-1871), author of the five-volume *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der deutschen* (1835-1842). Meltzl accuses Gervinus of having completely misunderstood what Goethe meant by *Weltliteratur*, by transforming literary history into an ancillary form of political and national history (180). On this question, Meltzl’s critique is incisive: in volume five of his *Geschichte*, Gervinus presents *Weltliteratur* as a dominantly German phenomenon that was set in motion through the exporting of German ideas to the rest of Europe, exclaiming with pride ‘endlich fand auch die deutsche Literatur ihren Weg über die Grenzen hinaus und unterjochte sich fremde Regionen’, a process which is said to have included the influence exerted by Goethe upon Carlyle and Byron (573, 577-79). For Meltzl, true *Vergleichung* involves the setting aside of such national prejudices in the name of *Wissenschaft*, which must outline a clear approach to its objects of investigation.

These methodological principles are elaborated further in part two of the ‘Vorläufige Aufgaben’ (*ACLU* 2, no. 15 (1877): 307-15), which includes the quotation cited at the beginning of this article. Here Meltzl alleges that Goethe’s conception of *Weltliteratur* amounts to nothing more than German *Übersetzungsliteratur* (308), by which he means the translation of foreign literatures into German. Meltzl concedes that translation does have a role to play in easing ‘der internationale Verkehr (oder Absatz) der verschiedensten Literaturprodukte’ (308), but he also maintains that literary analysis based on translation can only ever be indirect and superficial. *Polyglottismus*, by contrast, is described as a direct form of exchange (308-9). In practical terms, Meltzl suggests that an editorial principle of *ACLU* should be that contributions on national literatures always be written in the language of that literature (so that, for example, an article on Cervantes should appear in Spanish, regardless of the mother tongue of the author, a goal which Meltzl concedes is probably unachievable, 309). Related to the principle of *Polyglottismus* is Meltzl’s critique of cosmopolitanism, which he suspects may lead to the repression of the cultural particularity of smaller languages and literatures (310). Opposing comparative literature to world literature, Meltzl claims that ‘die Ziele der vergleichenden Litteratur sind wohl etwas solider’, in that the latter aims to protect ‘das Rein-Nationale jeder

Nation' by studying the even the smallest nation's texts in the original language where possible (310, emphasis in the original).

For Meltzl, Goethe's ideas on *Weltliteratur* were to be invoked, but also opposed and corrected. Although it is impossible to know which texts by Goethe on *Weltliteratur* were read by Meltzl, it seems clear that he was familiar with the well-known passages, especially those concerned with literary exchange as a form of *Verkehr*. Yet when one analyses Meltzl's ideas about comparative literature, it appears that it is precisely these elements of *Weltliteratur* which arouse his suspicion, leading him to invoke the principle of *Polyglottismus* as an antidote to the indirectness of translation and the apparent ease and arrogance of hegemonic German cosmopolitanism. In this respect, Meltzl's project seems closer to the ideas outlined by Goethe in the *Noten* to the *Divan*, since it is there where Goethe develops a theory of literary comparison that also betrays misgivings about translation. Both authors wish to extend their literary investigations beyond Europe; both recognise the initial value of translation in opening new literary vistas; both call for a knowledge of the text in its original context and, where possible, in its original language; and finally, both recognise the unrealistic dimensions of these demands by taking recourse either to non-intellectual or 'sensuous' means (Goethe's use of calligraphy), or by gesturing towards a future science (Meltzl's notion of comparative literature as a *Zukunftswissenschaft*).

The more recent reception of Meltzl demonstrates the ways in which his ideas, which emerged from his special situation as a German-speaker outside of Germany, might today seem strikingly modern and prescient about the contemporary concerns of comparative literature. Meltzl's emphasis on the utopian and future-directed aspects of the discipline, and his anxieties about nationalism and cultural hegemony, do seem to anticipate both the concerns of Auerbach in 'Philologie der Weltliteratur', and those of Maire and Edward Said who, in their introduction to Auerbach's essay, describe *Weltliteratur* in terms that are deeply redolent of Meltzl's goals not for *world* literature, but for *comparative* literature as a science of the future: '*Weltliteratur* is a visionary concept, for it transcends national literatures without, at the same time destroying their individualities' (the Saids in Auerbach 1). Despite the lack of transparency concerning Meltzl's eventual choice of ten official languages for *ACLU* – a choice which seems at once arbitrary on the one hand, and, in its exclusion of Romanian and Russian, politically motivated on the other – Meltzl has weathered relatively well. David Damrosch appreciates Meltzl's efforts to 'distance his project from a levelling cosmopolitanism', arguing that the *ACLU* can 'help us to create a study of world literature that truly deserves the name' ('Rebirth' 10; 'Hugo Meltzl' 20), while Haun Saussy has afforded a leading role to Meltzl's *Polyglottismus* in the history of comparative literature (6-10).

Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett's *Comparative Literature* (1886), the first English-language monograph on the subject, is less well-suited to the contemporary concerns of comparative literature than Meltzl's *ACLU*. But Posnett's reception of Goethe – or one might say of more general 'Goethean' ideas, for reasons that will be outlined below – is just as compelling if rather more indirect than that of Meltzl, because it demonstrates the wide influence of the comparative science for which Goethe coined a new word: morphology (*Morphologie*). Following a survey of Posnett's ideas about comparative and world literature, our task here will be to examine precisely what implications Goethe's morphology had for the intellectual background to Posnett's ideas about comparative literature.

Posnett (1855-1927) was an Irish barrister and scholar at Dublin University who was later appointed as Professor of Classics and English Literature at University College in Auckland. Prior to the publication of *Comparative Literature* in 1886, Posnett's research had focused on law and the social sciences, with his first book being entitled *The Historical Method*

in *Ethics, Jurisprudence and Political Economy* (1882). His later and more explicitly political writings also included works on economic theory (*The Ricardian Theory of Rent*, 1884) as well as on contemporary political debates (*Hereditary Lords*, 1894). In *The Historical Method*, one already finds the rudiments of Posnett's theory of comparative literature, which is essentially a social scientific theory informed by the thought of social evolutionists such as Herbert Spencer and Henry Maine. For Posnett, the 'historical method' offers an 'interpretation of Mental Evolution' (18), and its main subject is the social group, not the individual. The aim of the historical method is to demonstrate the relativity of social relations among different societies, with a general movement of progress being posited from clan-based societies and property relations, in which individual rights are subordinated to those of the group, towards individual rights enshrined under the utilitarian principle of the greatest good for the greatest number of individuals.

Related to the 'historical method' is the 'Comparative Method', which is also based on 'Social Evolution' (57), and which had, in Posnett's opinion, come to the view that collecting a wide range of evidence from different societies would allow one to arrive at universal ethical and legal principles. But for Posnett, the 'idea that we approach nearer and nearer to Absolute Truth by a wider and wider range of Scientific Comparison' is a 'deadly error', since it presupposes that one can, from one's own limited historical and cultural perspective, have access to that truth (57). For this reason, Posnett believes that the 'limitation of the Comparative Method', and especially the curbing of its universalist aspirations, is necessary to avoid making recommendations according to 'Foreign Parallels' between societies at different stages of development (58). Social progress from clan to individualistic societies is for Posnett a basic sociological fact, but its course is '*not uniform*; for each social unit, for each individual unit, the rate of that progress is *constantly varying*' (20, emphasis in the original). Even if Posnett differentiates here between the individual and the social unit, he makes it clear that the 'associations' of the 'individual mind' are always derived from 'social states' (11).

In *Comparative Literature*, Posnett applies this comparative method to the study of literature. Here again we are told that if comparative literature is to be characterised as a 'science', then it cannot 'mean a body of universal truths,' but rather 'limited truths discoverable in the various phases of literature' (20). Nonetheless, these limited truths can, in Posnett's view, be 'grouped round certain central facts of comparatively permanent influence'. The facts include so-called 'statical influences' – namely, the climates and environments of various nations and their effect upon literary expression – as well as the 'dynamical principle of literature's progress', which is 'the principle of evolution from communal to individual life' (20). The comparative method, which Posnett describes as the 'primary scaffolding' of human thought, has in his view been a largely under-theorised since the time of the ancient Greeks (73-74). The main achievement of the nineteenth century was to make comparison into a conscious method of reflection, a process which had two causes: first, the discovery of the New World brought Europeans into confrontation with 'primitive life', which gave rise to questions about differences between civilisations. In this context, Posnett explicitly mentions the discoveries of William Jones concerning the relations between Sanskrit and ancient Greek, which made comparative philology into the driving force of the comparative method. And second, the 'steam-engine, telegraph, daily press' have connected formerly distant people in such a way as to stimulate 'habits of comparison' (75-76).

In a chapter entitled 'The Relativity of Literature' (21-56), Posnett then draws aesthetic conclusions from his comparative analysis. Because literature always reflects the social organisation of the group at a certain stage in human progress, there can be no timeless aesthetic truths, because no poet, not even Shakespeare or Dante, wrote 'above the social and physical conditions under which he lived' (29). In this way, Coleridge, Carlyle and Arnold – by virtue of their alleged claims that certain poets of individual genius may arrive at eternal truths

concerning human nature – are all accused of producing ‘anti-historical dogma’ and ‘shallow universalism’, which Posnett deems to be ‘fatal to true historical science’ (29-30). Posnett’s critique of the universalisation of Greek classicism is also of direct relevance to Goethe’s *Naturformen der Poesie* as outlined in the *Noten* to the *Divan*. The categories of epic, lyric and drama are, for Posnett, merely ‘*a priori* notions’ which are undermined as soon as we look beyond Europe and discover nations that have ‘produced forms unknown to the Greeks’ (42). Similarly, our judgements concerning non-European literatures are hampered by problems relating to translation, since, to mention one of Posnett’s examples, Chinese metres are impossible to reproduce in English (44-45). Indeed, ‘in the translation process the bundle never arrives at the other side exactly as it was before starting’ (48). But these problems do not prevent Posnett from plotting a developmental continuum which sees non-European literatures being placed at a lower evolutionary level than their European counterparts. Because, for Posnett, the main ‘principle of literary growth’ consists in ‘the progressive deepening and widening of personality’ (72), the ‘castes and village communities of India’ and the ‘family system and sentiments of China’ are seen by him as having ‘prevented the growth of that individualised life which has become in Europe the main source of literary as well as of scientific ideas’ (335).

All of this might lead the reader to wonder in what sense Posnett wishes to invoke Goethe’s notion of world literature in the second quotation presented at the beginning of this paper. This quotation is taken from an essay entitled ‘The Science of Comparative Literature’ (see Posnett, ‘The Science’ 191), in which Posnett takes the opportunity to reflect – with a curious mixture of pride and defensiveness – on the reception of this book. Posnett’s reference to Goethe is intended to refute those unnamed reviewers who had apparently alleged that ‘world literature’ was Posnett’s own ugly coinage. Here the name ‘Goethe’ functions only to mark the prestigious heritage of the term, since in this essay of 1901 Posnett does not go into any detail concerning how the idea of ‘world literature’ – to which his book devotes over one-hundred pages (Posnett, *Comparative* 235-336) – is dealt with in that volume.

An analysis of these pages soon reveals that Posnett’s usage of the term bears little resemblance to any of Goethe’s discourses on world literature. According to Posnett’s definition, world literature is ‘the severance of literature from defined social groups’ (236). It arises once clan groups form themselves into larger religious or political communities. In the case of religions, ‘this expansion among tribal communities like the Hebrews and Arabs leads to religious cosmopolitanism, to an ideal of human unity deeply social in its character’, while in the ‘municipal communities of Athens and Rome’ a ‘similar expansion [...] leads to political cosmopolitanism’ (235). In Posnett’s presentation therefore, world literature is seen to have arisen much earlier than in Goethe’s account, appearing already in the ancient civilisations of Greece, Rome, China, India, the Arab world, and in the world of Judaism. The general function of world literature is to enhance literary development by moving communities beyond their clan mentalities towards the representation of individual consciousness in literature, with the Greek and Roman ‘city commonwealth’ models being particularly effective at engendering this form of progress – a factor which Posnett believes to have stimulated a faster rate of literary evolution in Europe (174).

Although, therefore, Posnett’s actual uses of the term ‘world literature’ have little to do with what Goethe meant by *Weltliteratur*, his overall theory of comparative literature has deep implications for post-colonial debates about world literature, since it sees the different cultures of the world as displaying different stages of literary development. In this respect, his theory of comparative literature draws on what George Stocking has described as ‘social’ and ‘classical’ evolutionism – theories that were formulated in the context of British imperialism both prior to and concurrently with Darwin’s theory of evolution via natural selection and its application to human beings in the *Descent of Man* (Stocking 170). Key texts in this tradition

include Hebert Spencer's essay 'Progress: Its Law and Cause' (1857), Henry Maine's *The Ancient Law, Its Connection with the Early History of Society, and its Relation to Modern Ideas* (1861), John Lubbock's *Pre-Historic Times, As Illustrated by Ancient Remains, and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages* (1865), and two works by Edward Burnett Tylor: *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization* (1865) and *Primitive Culture* (1871). All of these thinkers are referenced by Posnett in *The Historical Method*, and all contributed to the development of the 'comparative method' in the social sciences. Posnett saw his book on *Comparative Literature* as contributing to this social scientific tradition, and it accordingly appeared in Kegan Paul and Trench's 'International Scientific Series', alongside works by Spencer and Lubbock (see the indicative list below, which appears inside the front cover of Posnett's *Comparative Literature*).

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According to Stocking's authoritative account in *Victorian Anthropology*, the proponents of the 'comparative method' held that 'sociocultural phenomena' develop in line with laws similar to those found in nature, with the main tendency being one of progress from simple to complex organisation. Since these thinkers held that all humans 'share a single psychic nature', it should be possible, they thought, to make valid comparisons between different cultures according to their positions along a universal scale of human development. Differences in technology – or in Posnett's case, in modes of literary expression – would in these terms be explained by different rates of development, with European cultures having developed at the fastest rate. Earlier stages in European civilization would therefore be seen as roughly equivalent to the contemporary levels of cultural development found in some so-called 'primitive' societies, and the 'comparative method' would be used to research these similarities and differences (Stocking 170).

The roundabout route via which Goethe influences Posnett's theory of comparative literature is through his impact on this social evolutionist and comparatist paradigm in British thought, which is most clearly seen in that tradition's earliest and most influential representative: Herbert Spencer and his important essay 'Progress: Its Law and Cause' (1857). Spencer begins this essay by arguing that most social scientific theories of progress lapse into teleology by defining progress only in terms of increases in human happiness. A more rigorous scientific approach, he proposes, would identify laws of progress within the organic realm so that one could examine to what extent they can be applied to human societies. 'In respect to that progress which individual organisms display in the course of their evolution', writes Spencer,

this question has been answered by the Germans. The investigations of Wolff, Goethe, and Von Baer, have established the truth that the series of changes gone through during the development of a seed into a tree, or an ovum into an animal, constitute an advance from homogeneity of structure to heterogeneity of structure [...] Now, we propose in the first place to show, that this law of organic process is the law of all progress. Whether it be in the development of the Earth, in the development of Life upon its surface, in the development of Society, of Government, of Manufactures, of Commerce, of Language, of Literature, Science, Art, this same evolution of the simple into the complex, through a process of continuous differentiation, holds throughout. (446)

Here Goethe is placed alongside the German embryologist Caspar Friedrich Wolff (1733-1794) and the German-speaking Estonian embryologist Karl Ernst von Baer (1792-1876) as one of the most important theorists of organic development.

Goethe's ideas about organic development are outlined in his serialised *Heft* entitled *Zur Morphologie*, which was assembled between 1817 and 1824, around the time when he was also preparing the *West-östlicher Divan*. In the essay 'Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen zu erklären' (written in 1790, but appearing for the first time in *Zur Morphologie* in 1820), Goethe proposes the leaf (*das Blatt*) as the basic archetypal form of all plant life, which is then shaped into other parts of the plant (sepals, stamens, petals, and so on), through the twin forces of expansion and contraction (FA 1, 24, 110; for context, see Richards 453-57). The basic idea taken over by Spencer from Goethe was the notion that a simple archetype undergoes progressive development from simplicity to complexity. This very general 'Goethean' notion of morphology entered British science through the mediation of the Cambridge polymath and Master of Trinity College, William Whewell (1794-1866), who prominently discussed these ideas in his three-volume *History of the Inductive Sciences* (1837). There Whewell referred to 'Morphology' as a 'properly organical or physiological principle, distinct from all mechanical, chemical, or other physical forces' and he attributes this principle to 'John Wolfgang Göthe'

(sic), whose ‘views on the laws which connect the forms of plants into one simple system have been generally accepted’ (vol. 3, 434, emphasis in the original). This organic notion of development from simplicity to complexity was also a feature of German comparative philology of the early nineteenth century, found, for example, in Friedrich Schlegel’s claim that comparative linguistics should proceed in an analogous way to comparative anatomy (28), and in Franz Bopp’s notion that languages are organisms subject to physical and mechanical laws (vol. 1, iii). Both philologists argued that inflected languages – for them, Indo-European languages in particular – develop out of simple language roots into more complex modes of expression (Schlegel 41-42; Bopp vol. 1, xvii).

Posnett’s reception of Goethe is therefore multifaceted, and to a certain extent possibly unconscious, since he may not have been aware of Goethe’s influence upon what became the ‘comparative method’ in the British social sciences. Even though Goethe’s and Posnett’s notions of world literature appear to have very little in common, there are nevertheless significant overall correspondences between their ideas about literary comparison. Both see the increased need for comparison as arising from advances in communications and transportation technology; both express reservations about the efficacy of translation; and both, finally, propagate Eurocentrism, though in different ways: while Goethe believes that the classical genres of epic, lyric and drama may be applicable to all of world literature (a position that Posnett explicitly rejects), Posnett sees the individualism of European lyric poetry as being the pinnacle of world literary development – a pinnacle towards which other, allegedly more ‘primitive’ non-European literatures are purportedly still progressing. In this respect Posnett’s models are Wordsworth’s lyric poems and the democratic individualism of Walt Whitman (see Posnett, *Comparative* 387-89).

How influential has Posnett been upon the history of comparative literature? In ‘The Science of Comparative Literature’, Posnett claims to have coined the name of the field in English, a claim with which the chief historians of the discipline in English – René Wellek and Joep Leerssen – agree (Wellek, 3; Leerssen 198), even though this name had already appeared on the cover of Meltzl’s *ACLU* in the 1870s (a fact of which Posnett was probably unaware). Further to this, Posnett represents himself as having ‘laid down’ the ‘principles and method’ of this ‘new science’ (186), a claim which Wellek deems ‘preposterous’, since the Anglophone developments in the field were not isolated from foreign influences (3).

But for a period leading up to and around 1900, Posnett’s evolutionary model does seem to have decisively marked the discipline in the Anglophone world, with Pauline Yu noting his influence on early comparatists in the United States (42), including Charles Mills Gayley’s call for a ‘Society of Comparative Literature (or of Literary Evolution)’. Yet Simon During has observed that ‘what is most remarkable about Posnett’s book is how little relation it bears to comparative literature as we have come to know it’ – that is, as the post-war discipline conceived by Auerbach and Wellek, among others. ‘Rarely’, writes During, ‘can a founding text have left so few traces on the field it helped to inaugurate’ (315). This is no doubt because of Posnett’s use of the Victorian ‘comparative method’, which led him to claim that the British empire represents a positive instance of cosmopolitanism (‘The Science’ 191), rather than Anglophone hegemony. Nevertheless, During sees Posnett’s sociological and evolutionary approaches as anticipating the decline of ‘close reading’ as the exclusive method in comparative literature, a development seen in the work of Franco Moretti, though here one should note that Moretti’s evolutionary model is Darwinian variation and selection, not largely pre-Darwinian social evolutionism. Nonetheless, Posnett’s conception of ancient world literature does seem to coincide with Moretti’s first and historically earlier system of world literature as a ‘mosaic of separate “local” cultures’, though not with his second system, that of the ‘international literary market’ (Moretti 134-35).

If the name 'Goethe' and his discourses on *Weltliteratur* represent a series of possibilities that are open to deployment in various cultural contexts, how did the respective positions of Meltzl and Posnett determine the uses to which they put 'Goethe' at the origins of comparative literature? In both cases, 'Goethe' and *Weltliteratur* served very specific needs. For Meltzl, Goethean *Weltliteratur* represented both the utopia *and* the dystopia of Auerbach's world literature binary: it was utopian in so far as it provided an opportunity for a polyglot though largely German-speaking intellectual to combine the culture of his mother-tongue with the linguistic and political complexity of his region. In Meltzl's demands for *Polyglottismus* and direct knowledge of the original text, the utopian dimensions of *Weltliteratur* prevailed, but dystopia was never far away: rearing its head both in the threat of German cultural hegemony as embodied by Gervinus, and in the inevitable compromises that *Polyglottismus* was forced to make with reality, leading to Meltzl's curious and largely unconvincing justification for his journal's ten languages of *Dekaglottismus*.

Posnett's position in the British empire, firstly in Dublin, later in Auckland, led him to put Goethean *Weltliteratur* to entirely different uses. Because his concern was to establish comparative literature at the vanguard of the Victorian social sciences, he characterised his own decidedly non-Goethean conception of world literature as a progressive stage bridging the evolutionary transition from 'clan' to 'city commonwealth' modes of social organisation. For Posnett, Goethean *Weltliteratur* and its attendant 'cosmopolitanism' were badges of prestige that could be used to defend his vision of a progressive academic discipline. Although Posnett's characterisations of Indian and Chinese literature as 'backward' are rightly viewed as prejudiced from today's perspective, Posnett's would-be social-scientific theory of literature was nonetheless conceived as a progressive polemic against the idealist theories of literature associated with figures such as Coleridge, Carlyle and Arnold. Here Posnett's political writings are of contextual relevance, especially his pamphlet calling for the reform of what he regarded as the decidedly non-cosmopolitan (because predominantly English) hereditary House of Lords, which he viewed as oppressing not only the working class, but also the Celtic inhabitants of the Empire (Posnett, *Hereditary Lords*, 14, 35-37). But here a deeply ironic dystopia also loomed in Posnett's *Comparative Literature*, since it propagated a theory of culture that saw the 'British nation' – by which Posnett meant the entire Empire, including its non-European colonial subjects – as a cosmopolitan political arrangement in which 'less developed' cultures could be educated by their 'more developed' colonial masters. In the case of Posnett therefore, as in that of Meltzl, deploying Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* meant outlining a theory of comparative literature with unavoidable and often problematic political implications.

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